



Purpose-Driven Partnership Grows Community Resources

The HOPE Program / Sustainable South Bronx

In New York City, job training and retention services can make a world of difference for adults and families living in poverty. In Brooklyn and the Bronx, The HOPE Program (HOPE) and Sustainable South Bronx (SSBx) have each pursued this goal, in different ways and to different effect. In 2015, the two united in the form of a parent-subsidiary partnership to grow their reach, effectiveness, and impact.

Seeking Growth and Sustainability

Founded in 1984 to help break the cycle of poverty through workforce development, HOPE empowers New Yorkers to build sustainable futures through job training, placement, and ongoing career support. SSBx was created in 2001 to advocate for parks, green space, and environmental justice; over time, this came to include green jobs programs and a social enterprise.

In 2011, both organizations hired new executive directors, and Jen Mitchell (HOPE) and Michael Brotnier (SSBx) both found themselves in a peer learning community, along with a half-dozen other new and emerging executive leaders. Meeting monthly to share support and best practices, Jen and Michael learned about one another's work and established a rapport.

At HOPE, the organization was poised for growth. In 2013, the board held a strategy retreat and decided to build on a track record of strong program outcomes by expanding beyond Brooklyn, adding a sector-based training program, and pursuing a social enterprise.

At SSBx, the future was less certain. Michael took the helm at a time when funding was on the decline, making it difficult for the organization to realize its strategic plans. By paring back some programs, Michael was able to reduce some expenses and buy time, but it was a temporary fix. "We wanted to do more than just 'get by,'" he says. The board had to take a tough-minded look at whether SSBx could be sustained in its current form, and asked Michael to explore partnerships.



Alumni Voices

The ultimate impact of this partnership is on the lives of those served.

In the three featurettes that follow, Monica, Toure, and Diana — alumni of HOPE and SSBx — describe how both programs have changed their lives.

The joining of SSBx with HOPE grew each entity's ability to provide more people with enhanced resources and new opportunities to build sustainable futures for themselves.

In May 2014, Jen received a phone call from Michael. He had obtained advice from the New York Merger and Collaboration Fund (NYMAC) about how to move forward, and was reaching out to organizations he considered to be potential partners. “Would we have sought another partner organization if Michael had not called?” Jen reflects. “Not necessarily. However, we were open to growth in lots of different forms.”

Though neither Jen nor her board had anticipated pursuing a merger, the opportunity aligned well with their organization’s vision for growth.

- HOPE wanted to expand beyond Brooklyn to another high-need community/borough; SSBx served the Bronx.
- HOPE had already augmented its general work training program with a food industry focused program, and was ready to add another; SSBx worked in green jobs.
- HOPE sought to add a social enterprise, allowing it to hire its own graduates; SSBx already had a “Smart Roofs” program (now called “Intervine”) in place.

Where a partnership offered HOPE the potential for growth, it gave SSBx a way to bolster administrative functions and sustain its services, albeit from a different organizational “home.”

Though the match looked right in theory, HOPE’s board had questions to resolve before committing. HOPE engaged La Piana Consulting to guide them through a thoughtful negotiations process.

Committing to a Partnership

“It was a buy or build question for the board,” says Julie Silverman, vice chair of HOPE’s board. “Should we take on an existing organization or create our own? With the latter, there wouldn’t be any legacy issues. But ultimately, we felt that it would be very costly, and not necessarily better, to build something from scratch.”

Alumni Voices

“My husband didn’t tell me about the drugs, so it was a shock when I was arrested and sentenced to four years in federal prison. I lost my children. It felt like I lost all reason to stay alive.”

Monica, with a felony on her record, was unable to get a job after her incarceration. She was living on the streets when her parents lost their home to Hurricane Maria, moved to New York, and asked for her help. “That’s when I knew I needed a change,” she says.

A counselor at the homeless shelter told her about HOPE. There, she learned computer skills and how to make her past work experience as a cook stand out on her resume. She is now a kitchen manager and has ambition to launch her own bread company—and even more importantly, to reconnect with her children. “HOPE gave me a new platform for life and reconnected me with the abilities within myself.”

The HOPE board also evaluated its team’s strengths for a start-up venture and realized that launching a new enterprise would be enormously demanding. Also, by working with an existing entity in a different borough, there were relationships in the broader community to tap. “Once it was clear that we wanted to work on this partnership, we all worked very well together,” Julie says.

Jen and Michael each garnered buy-in from their respective boards, conducted outreach to external stakeholders, and worked through the challenges of financial and legal due diligence to make an informed decision that would set up the partnership for long-term success.

Leveraging Funder Support

Robin Hood, New York City’s largest poverty-fighting philanthropy, had supported HOPE since 1989, for a total investment of more than \$6 million—in fact, HOPE was one of the foundation’s first grantees. Robin Hood also supported SSBx since 2008 with grants totaling about \$1 million. It valued both programs because they served those with serious barriers to employment, such as homelessness or a history of incarceration. As a common funder to both organizations—and the largest—Robin Hood played a key role in the development of the partnership.

By going directly to their shared funder, HOPE and SSBx gained its confidence and support. “We liked how HOPE approached the transition. Not every group that expands has thought through and articulated the components and expectations for its new program; HOPE spent lots of time perfecting its model and identifying its objectives,” says Suzi Epstein, Managing Director of Jobs & Economic Security at Robin Hood. The partnership also received support from NYMAC, which is a fund managed by SeaChange Capital Partners.

Achieving More Together

HOPE and SSBx structured their partnership as a parent-subsidiary, so each maintains its own legal entity. The social enterprise is its own LLC, and HOPE administers all funding. SSBx is now branded as “a division of The HOPE Program.” Given the organizations’ community-rootedness in their respective boroughs, ample time was

Alumni Voices

“Nobody’s going to fix it for you. You have to help yourself.”

Toure grew up in Brooklyn and the Bronx. He was attending a technical college when he learned he was going to become a father. The baby, born premature, didn’t survive. Toure became depressed, dropped out, and began abusing drugs and alcohol. He was unemployed and living on food stamps when a friend told him about SSBx.

With SSBx’s support, he got hired in a construction and design firm. When, after a couple years, they cut staff, he returned to SSBx, which again helped him secure employment. “SSBx saved the day,” he says.

invested in messaging. Further, HOPE’s move into Hunts Point powerfully signaled to the community its commitment to working in the Bronx and the start of its next chapter. Staff integration was also prioritized: meet-and-greets and cross-training occurred, all staff were brought onto HOPE’s payroll within the first year, and all staff were ensured access to the same technology and communications resources at all program sites. From the outset, it was clear that Jen would be the executive director of the combined entity, a clarity that alleviated tensions that often exist in merger negotiations.

The HOPE/SSBx Partnership Timeline



HOPE's aspirations for growth and SSBx's desire for stability, as well as both groups' devotion to their workforce development missions and clients, created a serendipitous opportunity for both organizations to achieve their goals through a strategic partnership. Eased by the two executives' existing relationship and rapport, and their wise decision to engage their principal funder as part of the process, the partnership was achieved with the sense of unity in their shared commitment to the community. "Seeing them working from the same playbook all along, and achieving near-unanimous agreement on most matters, was very important and very gratifying," says Suzi.

From this new base of strength, HOPE has secured additional support (including public funding it had never received before), improved performance, and maintained strong program outcomes. Its social enterprise division for green jobs, Intervine, has attracted significant investments, allowing it to expand to serve not

only SSBx alumni but other qualified participants and to build its portfolio of paying customers. Since the partnership was finalized in 2015, the organization has expanded its footprint, doubled its budget, and more than doubled the number of participants it serves annually. Jen reflects, "As you grow, you have so much more freedom to be innovative and strategic because you have more resources." Michael adds, "The whole thing has worked out beyond everybody's hope."



To learn more about The HOPE Program and Sustainable South Bronx, visit:

<http://www.thehopeprogram.org/>

La Piana Consulting is at: www.lapiana.org

Alumni Voices

"Don't give up. There's always new learning. Start where you can."

Diana immigrated from Ecuador at age 10 with her mother. Neither spoke English, and the adjustment was difficult. They went to live with Diana's father in Queens. Over time, her father became abusive; this was their daily ordeal until they got help and moved into a domestic violence shelter.

Today, Diana has two young daughters of her own. Still living in Queens, she has supported her family with a series of odd jobs, but lack of job skills and gaps in non-citizen work authorizations have posed significant barriers to consistent employment.

Diana was unemployed for a full year before coming to HOPE. With the help she received, she secured an internship with a local business that quickly turned to a staff position. "Now," she says, "I am a food service associate and cashier. I want to become a supervisor...if I learn computers, I can be a supervisor."

Getting a job meant the world to Diana. Reflecting on her experience as a child witness to abuse, she says, "Seeing all that violence...I am shy. I want my daughters to do whatever I couldn't do. I want to support them. I want to show them that I can do it by myself."